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ABSTRACT

The research studies reviewed in this report show that bicultural readers comprehend and remember materials that deal with their own culture better than materials that deal with an unfamiliar culture. Studies indicating that culturally specific story structures affect reading comprehension are also described. A number of reasons given for not using culturally-relevant materials for readers from a foreign or minority culture are also considered. (MKM)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 12

STUDIES OF THE BICULTURAL READER: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS

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Studies of the Bicultural Reader:
Implications for Teachers and Librarians

It is an accepted fact that readers who are bilingual comprehend and remember materials written in their first language better than materials written in a second language. (See, for example, Yorio, 1971, described below; Macnamara, 1967; Cohen & Fine, 1978.) A fact which is not yet as well recognized is that bicultural readers comprehend and remember materials that deal with their own familiar culture better than materials that deal with an unfamiliar culture. A number of studies show that readers understand, remember, and enjoy their reading more when they share an author's background knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. A claim has also been put forward that when readers are familiar with the culture-specific story structure used by a writer, their reading is easier and more effective.

In this paper those studies showing how shared cultural knowledge (or lack of it) can affect reading comprehension will be described, as well as those experiments directed to story structure. A number of reasons given for not using culturally-relevant materials for readers from a foreign or minority culture will be briefly considered. Implications for teachers and librarians will be indicated.

Experimental Studies of Cross-Cultural Reading Behavior

One of the earliest cross-cultural reading studies was by Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932). Bartlett asked educated Englishmen to read and recall the North American Indian folktale, "The War of the Ghosts." He chose this tale because, among other things, it belonged to an exceedingly different social environment, and many of the incidents described were not related to each

other in an obvious way. Subjects were asked to recall the story more than once, in some cases over long periods of time--up to ten years. Bartlett found that subjects typically modified the tale in a manner consistent with their own culture. In an effort to make the story meaningful, they connected the details and made the text more coherent. Their recalls of the story were less "jerky" and "apparently inconsequential" than the original. Certain "rationalizations" occurred in which something in the story which was not understood by the subjects was identified with something they did understand. For example, when one of the characters died, "Something black came out of his mouth" in the original passage. This was rationalized into his breath or foaming at the mouth by subjects. Unfamiliar objects, such as peanuts, were transformed into familiar ones, acorns. Bartlett concluded that when people read a story, their background knowledge provides a framework for understanding the setting, mood, and chain of events.

In a recent study directed to the effect of the organization of a passage on processing, Kintsch and Greene (1978) reported an experiment in which a group of American college students were asked to recall two stories: a Grimm's fairy tale, and an Apache Indian tale. The experimenters were interested in finding out how the overall structure of the text, and the subjects' familiarity with that structure, affected their comprehension. They chose these two stories because the Grimm's fairy tale had a familiar structure, while the Apache Indian story had an unfamiliar one. The content of the stories was also culture-specific. Subjects listened to the stories and retold them, one to the other, five times. Kintsch and Greene found that the Grimm's fairy tale was transmitted through the sequential retellings quite

well, while the Apache Indian tale usually fell apart by the time it reached the last of the five subjects. They concluded that understanding a story and retelling it are facilitated when its organization is familiar. They also pointed out that their conclusions would have been more strongly supported if they had had a group of Apache subjects who had had no trouble with the Apache tale because it was organized in a way with which they were familiar.

Mandler, Scribner, Cole, and DeForest (1980) approached the effect of story grammar from a different viewpoint: they hypothesized that certain kinds of organization are universal and there should not be large cultural differences in recall of stories such as folktales that conform to such principles of structure. To test this claim, five stories were presented to Vai-speaking subjects in Liberia. Only one of these was a Vai folktale; the other four were foreign. Each of the foreign tales was translated into Vai, and certain changes in terminology were made so they would be compatible with Vai traditions, e.g., "dragons" became "water people," and "princesses" were changed to "chief's daughters." An analysis of the number of propositions that were recalled for each of the stories showed that children remembered less than adults, but there was little difference in the amount recalled by adults who were nonliterate, literate and schooled, or literate and unschooled. Equally interesting, striking similarities were found in the patterns of recall of Vai subjects and fourth grade and college students in this country. The researchers concluded that readers in a generally nonliterate society recall stories in a very similar way to readers in a literate industrialized society. Furthermore, they argued that

the cultural content of a story is less important than its form in determining how much is remembered.

In regard to the work of Kintsch and Greene (1978), Mandler et al. suggest that the structure of the Apache tale is one which occurs in all cultures (an episodic form) but is one which is inherently more difficult to remember.

While the issue of the effect of form for cross-cultural reading is not clearly resolved, there have been a number of studies directed to the effect of content, and there is growing evidence that different implicit knowledge systems which are assumed by authors have a profound effect on learning and recall. Steffensen, Joag-dev, and Anderson (1979) studied two groups of subjects with different cultural heritages: members of one group were Asian Indians, and those of the other were Americans. Each subject was asked to read and recall two letters, both of which had a similar organization. One described an Indian wedding and the other an American wedding. Since the wedding is a ceremony of great social significance, it seemed safe to assume that all adult members of a society would have a well-developed system of knowledge and beliefs about the marriage customs of their own or closely related cultures and a comparative lack of knowledge about the customs of more distant cultures. The authors were interested in identifying the characteristics of the subjects' recall of material that is culturally familiar as well as that of material that is culturally unfamiliar.

They found that both groups read the material dealing with their own cultural background faster and recalled more of the culturally familiar text. Both groups engaged in "elaborations" and "distortions"

of ideas when they recalled the texts. The distortions consisted of culturally inappropriate modifications of the text, or the text element stated in such a way that a native would say the point had been lost. Also included were outright intrusions from one's own culture, where unfamiliar ideas in the foreign passage were interpreted, comprehended, and remembered in light of the subject's own background. Some of these distortions were similar to those reported by Bartlett: changes were made when the foreign story was not understood to make it more logical and coherent. The elaborations consisted of culturally appropriate extensions of the text. More of a topic or idea unit was recalled than appeared in the text or could be inferred from the text alone. However, a native reader might say of an elaboration that it was a statement implied by the text, or perhaps even a paraphrase of a literal text element.

Unlike other studies which indicated a cross-cultural effect on reading comprehension (Bartlett, 1932; Kintsch & Greene, 1978), this study had a complete design: subjects from two different countries read two stories, one based on their own culture and the other based on the foreign culture. Due to this complete design, it cannot be argued that American subjects, for example, had an easier time reading the American text because it was really inherently easier. The authors concluded that the implicit background knowledge underlying a text exerts a profound influence on how well the text will be understood and later will be recalled. Even when the organization of two texts is similar, the native passage will be easier to process.

A study by Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, and Anderson (Note 1) investigated the effect of social group membership on reading comprehension and recall. Inner-city black, inner-city white, and rural white eighth grade subjects were asked to read and recall a letter about a sounding event. Because sounding is a form of ritual insulting that is found in black adolescent peer groups, particularly male, it was predicted that black inner-city subjects would recall the text in ways that were consistent with the authors' intentions, while white subjects would distort it. This in fact was found. Black subjects recalled the event as one of language play with the goal of amusement or the establishment of social status. White subjects, on the other hand, recalled it as a fight. Subjects were also asked to rate a number of statements which did not occur in the original passage on a five-point scale ranging from "Said in the same words as in the letter" to "Definitely no: This sentence disagrees with what is said in the letter and is definitely not true." This was an experimental test of the claim that members of a cultural group would say that appropriate expansions of a text were actually paraphrases of it, while nonmembers would not make such an identification. As expected, significantly more black subjects rated a statement such as "Bob and the other guys were just laughing and joking around" as actually appearing in the text. In contrast, white subjects rated statements such as "Mr. Reynolds had to break up the fight" as appearing in the text. The authors concluded that familiarity with the implicit knowledge underlying a story about a minority culture can also have a facilitating effect on reading comprehension.

Another study that indicates the importance for comprehension of prior familiarity with a topic was that of Lowry and Marr (1974). Taking the position that effective communication is related to the degree of similarity in the way individuals use a language, these researchers studied how membership in a religious sect and knowledge of the specialized language of that group affected comprehension. Four groups of Filipino subjects were involved: two groups had a low educational level, while the other two had a high educational level. Subjects in one high and one low educational group were known to be active in an evangelical Protestant student group (high prior familiarity). Subjects in the other two groups were not familiar with this church or its religious terminology (low prior familiarity). All subjects were tested on specialized and general passages, two of which were easy and two difficult. Of the specialized texts, the easy passage was taken from a version of the New Testament written for new literates, the difficult one from the King James' Bible. The easy nonspecialized text was a fourth grade level children's story, and the difficult nonspecialized text was a college level monograph on semantics. Every tenth word in all passages was deleted, and replaced with a blank, which the subjects were asked to fill.

The test scores of the four groups yielded several interesting results. For both the easy and the difficult specialized passages, comprehension scores dropped, but the drop was not so great for subjects who were members of the religious sect as for those who were not. On the difficult specialized passage, the low education/high prior familiarity subjects actually

scored higher than the high education/low prior familiarity subjects. Background knowledge of the topic proved to be more useful to the readers in this study than a high level of education.

Deligdisch (1972) tested adult new readers for the specific relationship between reading comprehension and cultural relevance. He studied two groups enrolled in literacy classes--blacks and Mexican Americans. He defined reading comprehension as a process consisting of three levels: the understanding of meanings that were (a) literal, (b) implied (inferable), and (c) applied (derived from the situation in which the utterance occurred). His hypothesis was that the adult new literates would read with better comprehension at each of the three levels when materials reflected their own background than when materials reflected an unfamiliar background. He designed reading materials to reflect cultural themes of the two ethnic groups, and tested mastery at all three levels of meaning with two types of comprehension questions--multiple choice and open-ended. From the results he concluded that ". . . both ethnic groups were better able to apply, relate and use ideas they read in their own literature than in the literature of the other group" (p. 81). He also found that, "On the level of applied meaning the two groups scored significantly higher on their own culture-related material than on the material related to another culture" (p. 69).

Goodman (1967) has studied reading comprehension in children who are native speakers of English. Within his theory, reading is described as a psycholinguistic "guessing" process in which the reader selects syntactic and semantic cues to reconstruct a coded message, and is guided in this

process by knowledge of the language. Yorio (1971), working within Goodman's theory, has analyzed the reading problems of foreign language learners. One major factor that hinders reading comprehension is the foreign language learners' imperfect command of the target language. According to Yorio, this makes it difficult for them to predict and select the correct graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues, and it constrains their memory of the cues which they have identified. The final result is that the associations necessary for comprehension either are not made or are distorted. A second major factor is interference from the native language. Imposing native-language patterns on the text being read may result in errors in prediction at the syntactic level and errors in meaning at the semantic level.

What makes Yorio's study particularly interesting is the fact that he had thirty Spanish-speaking students of English complete a questionnaire concerning their perceptions of the methods they used in reading, the problems they had, and the difficulty they experienced with different types of materials. Results of this survey showed that the students thought that vocabulary was their main problem, while grammar was not considered as great a problem. Subjects also indicated that although they seemed to understand the passage that they were reading, they easily lost the thread of it. These two principal sources of difficulty (vocabulary and losing the story-line of a text) can be related to the absence of the appropriate background information. In the case of vocabulary items, non-native readers do not control the generalized framework of information into which these terms "fit" in the target culture. Even if they know the translation

equivalent, the context which that concept entails in the native and foreign settings often will be very different. Likewise, "losing the thread" nicely states the problem. For the native readers there is little possibility of this happening because they share the author's cultural framework, and much of the information that makes the text cohesive is not even stated but is simply assumed by both parties involved. It seems obvious that both prediction and short-term memory would be dramatically improved if many of the relevant events or activities were already known and the immediate task faced by the reader was to simply ascertain what the variable details were that related to these events or activities. This study has employed an unusual method of approaching the actual process of comprehension--that of having the subjects give impressionistic ratings to different aspects of the reading task.

Goodman's more recent work (1978) is with children from different cultural backgrounds. He studied eight groups of children. Four of the eight groups were composed of students who spoke a language other than English as their mother tongue before entering school: Navajo, Samoan, Arabic, and Spanish. The other four groups were composed of students who spoke a dialect of English: Downeast Maine, Appalachian White, Rural Black, and Hawaiian Pidgin. Subjects were drawn from grades two, four, and six in different elementary schools. Each subject read two stories: one was a standard story and the other represented more closely the cultural background of the subjects' own group. All the children were first asked to retell the story, then answer several open-ended questions which were to

provide further evidence of comprehension. The miscues that the readers produced as they read were recorded.

The in-depth analysis of miscues indicated that:

> Language, reading included, must be seen in its social context. Readers will show the influence of the dialect(s) they control both productively and receptively as they read. Further, the common experience, concepts, interests, views and life styles of readers with common social and cultural backgrounds will also be reflected in how and what people read and what they take from their reading. (Goodman, 1978, p. 2-3)

From the analysis of the retellings of the stories a similar conclusion emerged:

> Knowledge and background experiences readers bring to their reading is highly related to their ability to reconstruct meaning and comprehend. (p. 7-61)

Goodman found the effect of cultural relevance more pronounced in the higher grades than in the lower grades. In the lower grades, cultural relevance was only one of the important variables, the others being the setting and characters. Younger subjects' comprehension was improved if the time of the text was present day and if the characters in the text were in their own age range.

The importance of culturally relevant reading materials has been demonstrated by a study conducted from the librarian's point of view. Lyman (1973a, 1973b) reported on the Library Materials Research Project, which had the major objective of developing criteria for assessing materials for adults reading at an eighth grade level or less. This population of "adult new readers" consisted of both native speakers of English and

speakers of English as a second language. The four principal components of the project were (a) a content analysis of reading materials using the criteria developed by the project; (b) a survey of adult new readers through personal interviews; (c) a study of reading materials being used in adult education and job training programs; and (d) an analysis of indigenous literature with emphasis on the relationship of content and use. There were a number of important findings. For example, adult new readers tended to recall titles that had ethnic appeal, a fact suggesting that these texts were most enjoyable and meaningful to them. Their reading was related to their needs and responsibilities: authentic materials related to their life styles had a great deal of appeal. A major conclusion of the project was that there is an apparent need for ethnic materials written by ethnic authors.

Gatbonton and Tucker (1971) reported on an applied cross-cultural experiment designed to improve understanding of literature by providing readers with relevant cultural information. An American control group, a Filipino control group, and a Filipino experimental group read two stories and responded to test items constructed to tap cultural differences. It was found that the two Filipino groups responded similarly and that both performed significantly differently from the American group. In the second phase of the study, the experimental group's attention was focused on contrasing aspects of American culture while the Filipino control group discussed the two stories, without cultural orientation. Both groups were tested again. The post-test responses of the Filipino experimental group differed from their pre-test in the direction of those of the American subjects, while those of the Filipino control group remained unchanged. The authors suggest that

there is a process of "cultural filtering" which occurs when a non-native speaker reads American literature, and they stress that a great deal of misunderstanding results because of inappropriate values, attitudes, and judgments being applied. This study is clearly a significant one, and the experimental manipulation itself provides some useful applications for the TEFL classroom.

The studies described above were focused primarily on the structure or the content of texts and how they facilitated or interfered with reading. Two studies have been directed to the affective impact of cultural knowledge on the process of reading comprehension. Sherrill (1972) measured the affective responses of members of two urban ethnic minorities--blacks and Puerto Ricans--to literature by black and Puerto Rican authors which dealt with the ghetto experience. All subjects were participants in adult basic education, or English as a second language programs. The hypothesis being tested was that there would be a greater affective response to literature which reflected one's own cultural background than to that which reflected a different cultural background.

Sherrill identified a number of themes reflecting the life situations and personal values orientations of the two groups, then chose eight literature passages (four each by black and Puerto Rican authors) which depicted these themes. Subjects responded to each passage on four semantic differential scales. Sherrill's (1972) hypothesis was supported and he concluded:

> . . . the cultural factors in the readers' backgrounds are powerful determinants of the intensity of the affective response to what they read, and . . . the intensity of their affective response is greater when they read personal experience literature by authors who share

> their own cultural background than when they read personal experience literature by authors from a different culture. . . . Cultural factors, both in the readers and in the personal experience literature that they read, constitute a significant element in the process by which they evaluate (express preference for or aversion to) and interpret the literature they read. (p. 85)

While Sherrill's research showed how literature drawn from the reader's culture can have an intense affective impact, a related study by Yousef (1968) showed that a negative attitude toward a culture will result in a misinterpretation of texts from that culture. The subjects in his study were Middle Eastern male employees attending classes at the training center of an American business organization. The teachers developed a special course about American culture because they felt that conflicting values and patterns of behavior were interfering with their students' understanding of American literature. After the program was completed, it was found that subjects were able to correctly answer questions drawn directly from a text. However, even after the intensive cultural orientation that was given, subjects were not able to answer inferential questions which related to everyday situations. Yousef (1968) concluded that the students' resistance to American culture overcame their motivation and efforts to learn.

In this section, three groups of studies of cross-cultural reading have been reviewed which deal with the effect of story grammar, content, and affective factors on comprehension. While the data on the effect of text organization on learning and remembering is not clear, there is an increasing body of evidence which shows that the cultural background knowledge that is assumed by the author (probably unconsciously) strongly

influences the performance of the reader. Furthermore, shared cultural assumptions can have intense affective value while negative attitudes toward the cultural behavior patterns underlying a text can interfere with the correct interpretation of that text.

Objections to the Use of Culturally-Relevant Reading Materials

The importance of choosing reading materials that match subjects' implicit values and patterns of behavior has not even been recognized by many people. When the cultural bias of reading materials has been considered, a number of reasons have been put forward against the use of such materials. First, a fear has been expressed that students will be "trapped" in their own system and will never acculturate or even learn about the target culture if such materials are used.[1] McPheron (1975) states that the real challenge of education is:

> . . . not to throw out Hamlet and Hawthorne and Melville because they happened a long time ago, or their world was different, their skin color or hair color or religion or region or language or sex was different from those of the students and teachers, but to show how, in spite of, even because of, these differences, they matter, they count, they have something to say about the human condition that speaks to our conditions, and help us know, a little or more, what being human is all about. (p. 20)

Some groups of readers will surely be equal to such a challenge, and will profit from it, but the problem arises when all readers are assumed to profit from the same challenges. McPheron does not take into consideration the needs of beginning readers or functionally illiterate adults who are trying to become literate. The experimental evidence does not support

her claim that ". . . when we start seeing everyone in terms of special interest groups, and locked into the group we have assigned them for the purpose of relevance, we are being reductive . . ." (1975, p. 21).

Cultural awareness is probably recognized by most as one of the important goals of reading in a foreign language or of reading in their own language by members of minority subcultures. (See Marquardt, 1967, 1969, for example.) However, it should be stressed that there will be no such insight without a fairly high level of reading comprehension. The most reasonable strategy would dictate using the easiest, most effective method to teach reading, and only after students can read intermediate-level materials independently, introducing passages based on the target culture. It should be noted that even for some groups of proficient readers, intensive cultural orientation may be necessary before reading target culture literature. (Skeptics are referred to Yousef, 1968, for a description of such a situation!)

Second, it has been argued that there is a unity between culture and language which should not be disrupted, and for this reason only "authentic" target-culture literature should be used in the classroom. (See Rivers, 1968, for example.) While there is some support for such a claim, it should be pointed out that a language can spread and either replace a previously used one or become a national second language. In such cases, a vigorous literary tradition often develops which reflects a new unity of culture and language. Consider the huge body of novels, stories, and poems written in English by Asian Indians and Nigerians, to give just two examples.

Even if such mateirals are not available, it is possible to develop simple texts drawing on the students' own background for the first stages of reading, then to use target culture texts with ample discussion of relevant points of cultural difference. Allen (1956) presents a detailed system for identifying just what the points of cultural contrast are. His system "raises to consciousness" what are often incorrectly assumed to be universal inborn patterns of behavior. Robinett (1978), Rivers and Temperley (1978), and Paulston and Bruder (1976) give methods for explaining and supporting the content of texts. DuBois (1978) describes one unit based on a regional novel about American Indians that she developed for an English as a foreign language course. She designed elaborate study guides to accompany each chapter. These consisted of a glossary, items of identification, general discussion topics, and questions on plot. The glossary included low-frequency, regional or Native American cultural terms as well as expressions difficult for international students to understand. In addition to the study guides, she brought to class Navajo jewelry, Hopi pottery, piñon incense, and a map of the southwest as well as newspaper clippings about Navajos. The class put on vocal dramatizations of the chapters from the book, listened to tapes of Navajo chants, visited museum displays and art shows, attended performances of Native American dances, and invited a Navajo student to answer questions. If one hopes to introduce a culture through literature, one should use a complete design like this one.

Finally, it has been pointed out that it is not easy to identify culturally relevant literature. Goodman (1978) observed that it was most difficult to find stories suitable for second graders:

> . . . regardless of ethnic group, when a search is made for short stories which related to the specific group, there is no long list of acceptable books available. Publishers may be reluctant to publish books which present what they may believe represent too narrow or parochial a view, whether it is true or not. (p. 7-15)

While this is a real problem for today's teacher, who is being asked to do more and more in less and less time, there is some hope that librarians will be able to supply much more detailed resource information in the near future. Lyman (1973a, 1973b), after reviewing the research by Deligdisch and Sherrill, has called on librarians to develop greater familiarity with such materials.

Conclusion

Recent studies indicate that the background knowledge possessed by the reader and the relevance of reading materials have a profound effect on reading performance. When readers share the writer's cultural background, there is a facilitating effect, and they will "recall" more information than is actually present on the printed page. A writer skilled in identifying and protraying one or two salient features of an event can evoke a rather complete culturally determined characterization of that event for his readers. However, if the readers do not share such knowledge, there is considerable interference.

There is also evidence that the strength of the readers' affective response to a text is determined by their cultural background, their personal experiences, and how well these match or do not match with the reading material. Readers respond more positively if the reading material seems relevant to their own background and lifestyle. In light of these findings, the possibilities of locking people into their own narrow parochial environment, of disrupting the unity of language and culture, or of discouraging the assimilation into the mainstream culture do not seem to be vital problems.

The findings reported above should be of concern to several different groups in the field of education: (a) teachers who are working with minority groups embedded in the dominant culture, and those whose primary interest is English as a second language; (b) teachers who are attempting to introduce mainstream students to a foreign culture through literature, e.g., teachers of foreign literature and world literature survey courses, social studies teachers who are attempting to enrich their course presentation; (c) serious students studying independently; (d) educators involved in forming new or revising old curricula for courses involving cross-cultural awareness; (e) educators who evaluate and grade foreign students and their language proficiency; and (f) those involved in teaching students who need remedial reading instruction. Those researchers involved in cross-cultural studies should also be aware of these findings.

Several different groups of librarians should be interested in them. Librarians in schools, community colleges, and the community should pay attention to their patrons' needs. One way of attracting functionally

illiterate people would be to advertise books suited to their interests and their lifestyles. Librarians called upon to give advice and recommendations on reading materials for children and new adult readers will do a better job if they are aware of these studies. Furthermore, all librarians familiar with the studies reported above would feel it necessary to find out more about their community when they select reading materials.

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1. Reynolds, R., Taylor, M., Steffensen, M. S., Shirey, L., & Anderson, R. C. Manuscript in preparation. A study of the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension: A comparison of black and white children.

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Footnotes

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[1]This is similar to arguments leveled against bilingual education programs. See, for example, Bethell (1979), Stone (1977, 1979), and Tucker (1979).

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